



The Police Association of South Australia

POLICE *Journal*

Feature story -

March 1997

[Volume 78, number 3]

"serving the protectors"

SUPERINTENDENTS BARRY BENNETT AND BOB FIELDING WERE THE FORWARD COMMAND FOR THE PORT ARTHUR MASSACRE THAT TOOK PLACE IN APRIL LAST YEAR. FROM THEIR IMPROVISED HEADQUARTERS AT THE TARANNA WILDLIFE PARK THEIR OFFICERS HAD THE UNENVIABLE TASK OF COORDINATING STAFF AND CONTROLLING THE ENORMOUS TASK OF THE POLICE RESPONSE TO THAT DISASTER. THEY TALK TO JENNY FLEMING ABOUT THE DIFFICULTIES ASSOCIATED WITH SUCH A TASK.

Forward Command at Port Arthur

by Jenny Fleming

Barry Bennett

About lunchtime on Sunday 28 April 1996 I was going to a barbecue with my wife when I received a call to contact the Communications Centre as there had been a shooting. I phoned the Communications Centre and was put through to the Major Incident Room and spoke to Assistant Commissioner Prins who said he had information that five people had been shot at Port Arthur and could I come back in. I immediately drove back into Police HQ to the major incident room and spoke to Mr Prins. I asked who had gone to Port Arthur and he said Inspector Wild had headed in that direction. As it is in my Police District I told him that I would be going straight away to Port Arthur to take charge of the incident assault down there and that he should obviously get in support to help him in the major incident room. When I left, because I have a plain unmarked car, I borrowed a revolving flashing light from the uniform people and drove to Taranna, 10 km north of Port Arthur.

On the way down Channel Six was being used for the incident and it was really overloaded with traffic coming and going. The local channel was being used for general police duties. On the way down I was asking questions like 'where are the SOG?', 'where are the negotiators?' because they are a basic resource for the police force commander. Everything was very sketchy at that stage and that was when I could get a word in on the radio. It was pretty busy. I eventually got down to Taranna Devil Park where some young constables had taken over the office and started to set-up the four command posts with the concurrence of the owner John Hamilton, who I must say was absolutely wonderful to us throughout the whole incident. His family made coffee and sandwiches throughout the night and provided everything that he could possibly get for us at every opportunity.

When I arrived there was already a road block just south of Devil Park at the Nubeena turn-off. There were three telephone lines at the Taranna Devil Park but no police radios. I parked my police vehicle as close as I could get it to a window, with a window open with a police officer sitting in my car so at least we had some radio communications. Immediately it was apparent that we were going to have problems with general communications -- mobile telephones and cellular telephones did not work in the area. Our radio network was very scratchy and very poor -- there was only one channel, Channel Six so we got one constable to dial the major incident room with one of the telephones from Taranna and from that time that telephone was left off the hook and monitored so that at least we had a land line.

The police presence started to build up as we got more people in. Detective Inspector Warren arrived and I asked him to go to the incident site to take charge of the detectives and the investigation. Inspector Freeman arrived and I tasked him with the security of the incident site. That is the historic village and where the bodies were in the fort. I was requesting more people, more general duties police, more uniform police and more detectives -- so that we could start to have the place secured and start talking to witnesses. The number of police built up over a period of time. We tried to set up as best we could the forward command post in Taranna Devil Park. We put some butcher's paper on the walls to run our logs and charts on and we set up a couple of constables on running sheets and logs. We had a couple manning phones and even had a fax running when the BCI arrived later in the night. That is where they set up their intelligence cell.

The Special Operations Group (SOG) arrived by helicopter and I briefed them on what I expected them to do. We had two young police officers in a ditch, Constable Allan and Constable Whittle, directly in line with Seascope who were being fired on at that stage -- they would remain there for the next eight hours. There was some suggestion that there may be two suspects. It appeared at one stage that two gunmen or some people or hostages at Seascope were exchanging gunfire with the gunmen as there appeared to be shots coming from two separate buildings. The secure radio net

for the SOG did not work at all in the area so realistically later in the night for me to be in charge of the SOG on the ground, the only way I could communicate outside of the open channel -- obviously there were lots of things I needed to talk to them about that needed to be secured -- I had to get a police officer to physically drive five kilometres with a message from me to SOG on the ground and bring whatever message they had back to me. Later in the night the SOG worked on three occasions to get closer to try and get better communications but my biggest problem throughout that night remained communication.

I have been asked on several occasions how I felt about the number of dead, but quite frankly I was too busy doing things that needed to be done to stop and think about it. I only know that it seemed that every time I spoke to the media the body count went up. We had a lot to do. We had to set up the police forward command centre, and get people into the site, get people out of the site, get the criminal secured at Seascope and get our SOG people in there to try and find out what was going on with negotiations. Normally negotiations would be a resource for the police forward command post but because of the telephone set-up, negotiations commenced from the major incident room here in Hobart and any information I got from our negotiators was basically second and third hand.

Our SOG would normally monitor the negotiations for obvious reasons -- to see if they could make some tactical decisions on what was going on inside the stronghold. They had no contact with the negotiators throughout the night so they were getting it through me third and fourth hand which really caused me some heartburn and slowed things down tremendously.

Very early on, the media started to build up in the car park. I got there about 3.00pm and I think it was probably about 4.00pm the first time I spoke to them. I took a decision to talk to the media candidly. I went outside and saw a Mercury Reporter and Photographer called Robin Lane. He was the only one I knew and there must have been 10 or 12 there at that stage. I said if you can get them together I will talk to them. They did come together and I spoke to them. I gave them the very scant information I had at that point and I told them if you play by some ground rules I will speak to you at very regular intervals and give you updates as they come to hand. Peter Heazlewood from the Premier's Department arrived just as I finished that and from that time on he was my media liaison officer and he did an excellent job. I had a very good run with the media and that is an area that sometimes causes us a lot of grief in sensitive situations.

The number of police obviously built up throughout the night. We had a register running of police officers coming in and they were all coming through the police forward command post before they went in to do the various tasks that they were given but there were a lot of police. The media scrum built up over the night -- there were probably 10 or 12 there when I first spoke to them and probably the last time I spoke to them there were around 200. But I managed to speak to them on regular occasions.

Once we got the SOG on the ground it was obvious that it was going to be a longer siege than we normally encounter. Having been the SOG commander for four years I really know what they were going to go through. So I requested help from the Victorian SOG. This has never happened that I know of anywhere around Australia before. But in a very short period of time I had a reply that they were coming and prior to midnight around ten of them arrived on the ground, which was absolutely fabulous. They were sworn in as special constables.

Things started to quieten down somewhat after 1.00am or 2.00am. Contact with the offender at Seascope had ceased, because we now know that the battery on his handheld phone had gone flat. We tried to use several methods of radio broadcast to tell him to pick up the phone to put a battery in the thing but nothing happened. Prior to that he was talking to SOG on-and -off up until about 9.30pm. Right throughout my shift there were shots being fired indiscriminantly at police and at

police postings. I charged the SOG with getting the two police officers in the ditch out immediately they got there, but the information I got back from the SOG commander on the ground was that it was too dangerous to get them out during daylight. After dark they were extricated from the ditch and arrived back at police forward command post wet and covered in leeches. I told them to go home on several occasions, but like most police officers that night, nobody seemed to want to go home. They all wanted to stay around and help. And I guess, I can relate to that because when Bob took over I was a bit reluctant to leave myself.

I don't know that there is a great deal more that I can say other than that the communication problems just added to the concerns and put pressure on everybody throughout the whole incident. It was a very difficult area for the operation because of the communications problem. What we had really was two incidents: One at Seascope with the SOG and technical people and the suspect contained and the other incident at the historic site where the original shootings took place and the security of that site. Two incidents with next to no communications between them at all.

I just can't speak highly enough of the people involved and the way they handled themselves. Quite frankly I have never been more proud of Tasmania Police in the 31 years I have been in the police force. Everyone worked under such trying conditions.

Bob arrived about 3pm and told me to go home. I sort of sat around for a while in case there were some things that I had missed in the briefing or something that he wanted to know and then he said that he had a grasp of it and he was ready to run and I drove home. I couldn't go to sleep. I had a coffee and laid on the bed and watched all the news flashes on TV. Afterwards when the offender was taken into custody, I got a phone call directed by Bob to tell me he was in custody. I then had a shower, got changed and went back to where it all started. It is my police district and I thought it the best place for me to be and there I spent the rest of the day.

Bob Fielding

Initially I got the call at home to go into the Operations Centre. When I arrived I was then told to go to Forward Control post and take over from Supt Bennett. I drove to Taranna and got there a little after 2, maybe 2.30pm. For a while Barry was very busy as you can imagine, he was still in the process of trying to get intelligence organised and the forward command post fine tuned. So as is my habit in such matters I started to brief myself by walking around the forward command post looking at the status boards and talking to some of the staff. At a later time Barry had time to sit down with me very briefly and we then went into a detailed debriefing of the situation.

At about 3.30am I officially took over from Barry as the forward commander. As is also the practice Barry stayed around for a little while just in case something arose that we had not covered in the briefing and by about 3.45am I told him it was about time that he went -- he was reluctant to go, naturally -- and I said I didn't want to see him back before 4.00pm in the afternoon.

Obviously our thoughts at that stage were that we had it contained and the main objective was to negotiate the safe release of the hostages if in fact they were still alive. That was the primary objective -- to keep him contained and not to allow this situation and incident to escalate any further and to negotiate the release of the hostages. That was being frustrated to some degree because the negotiators had lost contact with him. As the manager of the incident you need to be able to talk to the hostage taker and open some sort of dialogue. Now that was not possible. Prior to his portable telephone battery packing it in they were negotiating reasonably successfully with him I think. Certainly that is what the

logs show. So one of the primary objectives from when I took over from Barry was to continue and try to establish negotiations with him again. The property is cut off by a very large ditch or creek and the only access for any wheeled vehicle is across a small bridge that gives access to the house from the roadway. The control cables throughout echidna which was being considered for use, stretched only 300 metres -- now there was nowhere to hide an operator and then be able to safely negotiate the echidna with some equipment, either another telephone or some other form of communication, with the person in the house.

Those things were still being investigated right up until, I suppose daylight, and we were still trying to find a solution then. In fact some of the people responsible for that move were actually forwarded to the house endeavouring to find another means of getting some communication to him. We had difficulty as Barry has already outlined to you with having to use a police communications system which was over an open channel and the fact that we only had one channel available to us in that particular area because of it's location -- the actual terrain itself made communications very, very difficult. We had thankfully, by the early hours of the morning, established a line between the SOG strongholding area and the police force command post. That meant that we could talk securely with the forward elements of the SOG through their holding area back to the forward command post so there was some security in that regard with our conversations. They had to move twice to try and find better communications and sustain the connection. Their final holding area of the SOG was in the middle of the Arthur Highway. They were not very impressed! So we were still getting those things organised when I took over the forward command post. I was very pleased with the set-up, it was an ideal forward command post. It had all the things that you need for a forward command post: adequate parking, telephones, faxes, shelter, food supplies. It would have been better if it was closer but given the terrain there was nowhere else and its position was good. Because it was a tourist location it had a couple of sets of toilets -- male and female -- at one stage we must have had a couple of hundred people in the location all using these public toilets. As you can imagine, the inevitable occurred -- blocked toilets. We can smile now but it was a bit of a problem at the time and we had to get them fixed.

Those things continued on, we continued to brief the press on a regular basis and we put together our formulated plans for the resolution of the incident and I signed off on most of those by around about 7.00am. At 7.45am the first sign of fire was seen from the house. That gave us some more difficult decisions. I had further discussions with the SOG liaison officer, the psychiatrist Dr Sale and with the head of the negotiation unit, Inspector Tom Tully. I went through with them what they thought was the situation as far as the hostage being alive was concerned. They of course did not know, unless they had actually been in the building you were never going to know. But they really thought that they were most likely deceased at that stage.

We didn't know where Pearce was. Pearce was the fellow that he abducted near the toll booth. We were still uncertain at that stage whether he was dead in the boot of the burnt, or in the house. We did not know in fact until Bryant had been arrested that Pearce was in fact in the house. No one could get close enough to the car prior to that to investigate.

There were also some difficulties in that Bryant had some sort of line vision device. Every time there was a slight movement in the area he was able to identify and indicate roughly the vicinity of where the SOG advancement and other people were. That was a grave concern to us. So that is why the strategy of just keeping him contained within there and doing nothing much else in the hours of darkness was maintained, because every time anyone either moved or there was any further movement of any kind he was continually firing shots.

The fire then started and there was a lot of discussion as to what we should or should not do. In the finish I thought that I would not allow the SOG, given their

likely casualty rates if they went forward, to approach the house. The house in fact burnt for three quarters of an hour. He was finally arrested at 8.30. He started the fire. There was a lot of things that went on at that particular time and there was some discussion about whether we would have to send somebody in because we might be letting people burn alive in there. At the end of the day I weighed it up on the basis that it was better to let that occur, than to needlessly risk another nine or ten people's lives to go in and that was what we did. Certainly from his actions, Bryant wanted us to go in while the house was burning. Right up to within about ten minutes of being arrested, he was well ablaze and yelling out. He was trying to goad people to come in -- he was yelling out things like come on, come and get me! Words to that effect.

He literally burnt himself out of the house. It started upstairs on the bay side. In the finish he was on fire outside the house and the SOG were finding it very difficult to see. You can imagine the amount of smoke that was around. He was in amongst the smoke; you could hear shots being fired at that stage. It was the ammunition in the house going off, there was over 2500 rounds in the house. So there were rounds being discharged from the heat of the fire as well as what he was firing. He came outside and his clothes were on fire or someone came outside with clothes on fire, they could not see because of the smoke exactly who it was, I would not allow them to go forward because I could not be certain from what they were telling me that it was Bryant. They tried talking to him but they could not make themselves heard because of the distance and the noise from the fire and the ammunition that was going off. In the finish he was visible and naked. They went forward and they arrested him using the ballistic shields as protection. If you read the Australian, I was quoted as saying something at this stage and I was actually misquoted. In response to someone asking whether Bryant was armed I was supposed to have replied: "He does have a weapon but it's nouse to him." What I actually said to the SOG liaison officer was: "Even if he is, let the bugger go for it...", bear in mind I am only getting this verbally -- I can't see what is happening. I said "the only thing he's got is his mutton gun and that's not going to penetrate any ballistic shield, so go and get him!" Everyone burst out laughing. It was one of the few lighter moments of the night.

Story courtesy Tasmania's "Association News".

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